DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 015 CS 200 992

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TITLE	The New Soul for English-Filmmaking.
PUB DATE	Nov 71
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (61st, Las Vegas, November 25-27, 1971)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Audiovisual Communication; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Film Production; Film Study; Literacy; *Negro Literature; Negro Students; Reading; Secondary Education; Visual Literacy; Writing

ABSTRACT

This unit is designed to enable students to advance in their ability to relate to the visual and the verbal, and to develop students' creative abilities. Phase 1 describes a method to help students recognize vagueness in writing and presents the proper use of abstractions. Phase 2 encourages an awareness of dominant or total impression in a story and the elements that affect that impression. In phase 3 the students were assigned a short story and the more advanced students created a film based on their reactions to the story. The viewing, analysis, and student production of films is the basis of all phases of the unit. (LL)

Tempo di Marcia

Out of the abysses of Illiteracy,
Through labyrinths of Lies,
Across wastelands of Disease...
We advance!

Out of dead-ends of Poverty,
Through wildernesses of Superstition,
Across barricades of Jim Crowism...
We advance!

With the Peoples of the World...
We advance!

From that great poet Melvin B. Tolson's "Dark Symphony," this segment became my inspiration, my guiding force to take a group of Black eleventh grade pupils out of the wilderness of jumbled words cropped between the pages of hard-back state adopted textbooks and into a world of living creativity. Because my students are, in real life, part of the We in Tolson's poem, I had to reemphasize the "We advance" again and again. "We advance" became my motivational phrase. I knew that there was a way to move these students who were caught in the central city school, bounded by multiple family dwellings, bayous, and complex freeway systems, out of illiteracy, superstition and boredom. The way to move my students into an understanding of the larger world was through the visual--the film.

The films which would be needed and could be gotten through

the school district's central audio-visual center were either unavailable at the time needed, or those available had little or no relevance to my students. Therefore, from sources outside the school district, I was able to obtain films with which to begin my campaign of advancement. I began to saturate my students with films--"Neighbors," "The Eye of the Beholder," "George Dumpson's Place," "Castro Street," "Choice of Weapons," "March on Washington," "Red Baloon," "Dream of Wild Horses," "Balls," "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," and many more.

The various films were followed by discussion-always inductive. Often the students were asked to write their reactions to certain phases of the film or to tell how they would react in the same situation. The students were always encouraged to write exactly how they felt--never were they restricted in their form, length, or content. After about two weeks of this kind of "English" we began to hear, "We have soul in this English class." "Ah," thought I, "We advance!"

The obvious move then was to go back to the printed page, but not the traditional printed page within the confines of the state adopted text. Here then, is the three-phase program under which I operated in order to advance my students.

Phase I.

I excerpted the following sentences from Richard Wright's Black Boy and introduced a unit called"Earn the Right to Use

Abstractions," adapted from Robert Christin's larger unit on student writing. Papers written by my students as outgrowths of their film viewing were laden with vagueness.

Earn the Right to Use Abstractions
from Black Boy
Richard Wright (1945)

1. There was the delight I caught in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon.

2. There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez.

3. There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a black autumn sky.

4. There was the tantalizing melancholy in the tingling scent of burning hickory wood.

5. There was the teasing and the impossible desire to imitate the petty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of the country roads.

Following is the step by step procedure used to get into our first film.

1. Mimeograph sentences and give to students at the beginning of the class period. (More sentences may be used).

2. Have students read the sentences silently. (Oh the pain on their faces as they struggled with these sentences).

3. Have students call all the words and phrases that they feel are abstract and hold no meaning for them.

4. List these on the board as rapidly as possible.

5. Have students re-read each sentence aloud. (This may require several readings of the same sentence--do not despair).

6. Have students then name all of the details that they feel are needed to bring the abstractions into focus for them.

7. Select five other abstractions and have students make their own sentences.

8. Take up the sentences the next day and go through as many as possible, using almost the same procedure as the day before.

Some sample student sentences:

(1). I know the beauty of deep green trees as they spread their leafy arms to protect precious undergrowth.

(2). I know the sound of dried underbrush that crackles under my bared feet, while from their cozy hide-a-ways birds chirp with glee__the chirps,the crackles, make music to my ears.

(3). I know the ugliness as I make my way through the narrow alley with its murky, scum-topped water and its wooden, makeshift walk.

(4). I know the filth as my anxious eyes scan the area and I see the waste--the scattered garbage--the rage of man.

(5). I know the coziness that exists as I stare at simple little bungalows that house happy people.

(6). I know the feeling of the warm sun as it sends down its silvery beams to caress my hungry face.

These sentences, you notice, all follow a definite pattern

The decade of the sixties was marked by unprecedented activity in research and curriculum evaluation as increasing population mobility and an alleged national commitment to equality of educational opportunity served to focus attention on individual and group differences in achievement among the nation's school children. Language, long recognized by teachers as somehow related to the intellectual and social development of the child, has been a central feature of much of this research and theorizing. The new and rapidly growing field of Psycholinguistics is emerging as the leader in child language study. It takes an interdisciplinary approach to language which is bringing together the relevant theories and research from many disciplines including sociology, anthropology, communications, and child development as well as its intrinsic constituents, psychology and linguistics. Psycholinguists are primarily interested in the acquisition and use of the linguistic system and in language behavior as it relates to other behaviors. At present, psycholinguistic research is still in its infancy, and psycholinguists are quick to point out that many of their findings are still in a tentative state. Nevertheless, the press of human concerns requires that we begin to consider the educational potential of some of their more promising findings.

Recognizing the presumptiousness of attempting to treat so complex a subject in so short a time, I shall limit this presentation to selected aspects of the following premises: (1) language acquisition theory has relevance for educational practice, and (2) the extent of the child's knowledge of the uses of language in a variety to communicative contexts has some bearing on school performance.

Implications of Language Acquisition

Let us begin with a consideration of the possible educational implications of the universal human capacity for acquiring language. Simple observation may make it obvious to first grade teachers that children come to their first day of school equipped with a relatively sophisticated mastery of their native language. However, there is nothing simple or obvious about the processes by which the child has acquired his language, nor is the process without relevance for elementary education. The ability to communicate with language is a peculiarly human behavior which seems to be the result of some innate mental capacity operating in concert with biological and environmental factors. The universality of the language acquisition process is supported by data which reveal remarkable similarities in the pattern of development among children from vastly different cultures, environments, and language communities (Slobin 1968, 1969). By the end of their third or fourth year most children have mastered the basic grammatical devices and structural patterns involved in the utterance of their language, and by their fifth or sixth year have sufficiently stabilized the rule system so that they are able to control many of the inconsistencies and complexities of their language. By the time they enter first grade, normal children are producing a near match for the adult grammatical model of their particular language community (McNeill 1970; Menyuk 1961; O'Donnel, Griffin, Norris 1967).

There is so much uniformity in pattern and rates of language acquisition that innate biological capacity and species-specific language capabilities seem to be fundamental to the process. Biolinguist Eric Lenneberg (1967) believes that acquiring language is to some extent dependent upon the maturation of neurophysiological states of readiness which are triggered by external stimulation. Lenneberg's research is of particular relevance for education because of findings which suggest that there is a "critical period" for creative language

and contain the melodic details which bring the abstractions into focus. I would like to think that the previous day's lesson was solely responsible for the better sentences, but I know that the natural, rhythmic, heretofore untapped, creativity of the students had come alive. We were ready to advance.

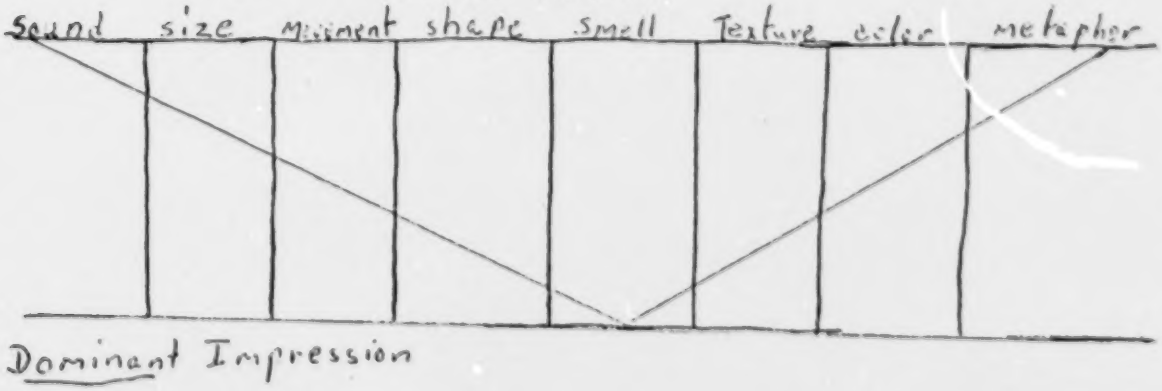
Two student-made films grew out of this lesson. One film became an award winner at the first Houston High School Film Festival. The film called "I Know..." attempted to capture the abstraction of beauty contrasted with ugliness. The other film attempted to capture the abstraction contentment. The students, you see, had now moved from the visual, to the printed, to the verbal, to their own writings, then to their self-made visuals--the film.

Phase II.

Time to move to more complex material. Still not time for the state adopted hardbacks, however.

I turned to John Muir's "Yosemite Falls." Give to students.

1. Draw a chart on the board. It may resemble the one shown.



2. Again have students call out the various details and the category to which they may belong. You list these.

3. Finally ask them what dominant or total impression they have received. This can be in the form of a composition.

(Here the answers will vary, and you may or may not care to lead them to your personal dominant impression).

4. Here you may ask a student to capture his reaction on film.

One student film, "Grow Town Grow" grew out of this lesson. The film attempted to capture the tremendous burst of construction activity in the central downtown area and then to compare this with the death-like atmosphere of "old downtown" on one end and the leisurely, almost suburban atmosphere at the other end. The student tried to emulate Muir's use of point of view by selecting a fixed position from which he arranged details that in total, created a dominate impression.

Phase III.

Move to the short story. Select one that the students may identify with. My selection was James Baldwin's "Rockpile."

1. Have students read the selection.

2. Give the following or similar follow-up activity.

a. Explain the statement, "...and she found in his face not fury alone, which would not have surprised her; but hatred so deep as to seem insupportable in its lack of personality. His eyes were struck alive, unmoving, blind with malevolence--she felt, like the pull of the earth at her feet, his longing to witness her perdition."

b. Explain either in a paragraph or by illustration the part

of the story which impressed you most, either positive or negatively.

c. What is your rockpile? Explain fully.

(These choices are given in order to meet the varying ability levels within a single class).

3. A student-made film called "Rockpile" with a genuine rockpile in it shows the rockpile as a barrier which separates a primitive people in an urban wasteland from present-day civilization. The film appears disgruntled and is obviously pessimistic--but reflects the student's own views of the larger world. Unlike Tolson, the studnet does not have his people advance. "They go back to the forest--their home," says Daniel Alexander, the student filmmaker.

For a group of fifteen twelfth grade students who had gone through most of the experiences that the eleventh grade students were now having, I sought to work with the novel. The students selected from a list of annotated novels. Their selection was a contemporary one--Sam Greenlee's The Spook Who Sat by the ...

After the book was read and discussed, the students divided themselves into groups and assigned responsibilities to a script writer, a director, a cameraman, a lightman, and editor, and a soundman. The final films were supposed to capture any segment of the novel which impressed them.

One film, "A Time to Strike," attempts to capture the segment where Freeman, the super-Black hero returns to his

boyhood ghetto neighborhood to solicit the help of the toughest gang, the Cobras to carry out his plan to sabbotage major capitalistic enterprises in the major cities of the U. S. In this segment, Freeman is confronted with hostility from the Cobras and in a fight behind the Cobra's pool hall hang-out, Freeman conquers the three tough Cobra leaders singlehandedly. Well, to the viewer of the film this is not very true to life. But were the entire plot known, the viewer would know that Freeman is a product of the ghetto, himself a former king of the Cobras, has a black belt in karate, and a good white man's education from a large university. These are the things that give him the edge over his ghetto brothers, hence enabling him to suddue three "toughies" who have only the survival brute strength so common in the ghetto. How does one capture all of these things on film? How does one begin a film that is only an excerpt from a novel and still be able to justify its end? This is an inherent danger when trying to create from another form. However, with all the inherent dangers, this kind of assignment lends itself to an exciting experience.

All of the units were designed to have my students advance. I wanted them to relate to the visual, the verbal, and their own creative abilities,with the printed page, with themselves, and the larger world. And adding the term "soul" to the English class would advance my students to move with the Peoples of the World, then the break with tradition was worthwhile.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mrs. Roberta Deason, English Specialist, retired, Booker T. Washington High School

Mr. James Blue, former filmmaker in residence, Rice University

Mr. Bruce Baille, former filmmaker in residence, Rice University

All of the technicians, Rice University Media Center.

Principal Franklyn D. Wesley and Staff, Booker T. Washington High School.